

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > History (Russian Empire, USSR) > Russian Revolution > **Lessons from the Russian Revolution: ‘National struggles by oppressed (...)**

Lessons from the Russian Revolution: ‘National struggles by oppressed peoples are generally progressive’ - “Mike’s reply does not acknowledge the fact that the Bolsheviks changed their position on the national question after 1917”

Friday 6 June 2014, by [BLANC Eric](#) (Date first published: 5 June 2014).

The following comments by Eric Blanc first appeared in Kasama Project [1]; they reply to a contribution by Mike Ely [2]. For other items in this discussion, see Eric Blanc’s “National liberation and Bolshevism reexamined” and other comments (“Constituent Assembly” [3] and “Five Views” [4]).

1) First of all, I’d like to thank Kasama for reposting the article and I really appreciate Mike Ely’s comments, which merit serious reflection. While I agree with some of the political points Mike makes, I think his overall argument is based on two false premises: the first is that my analysis assumes that “every oppressed nationality needs and wants a separate nation state;” the second is that the Bolsheviks never changed their position on the national question.

2) Concerning the first assertion, at no point in my article did I argue that every people needs or wants state independence. In fact, I definitely do not think there can ever be a uniform solution to the national question valid for all times and places. Given the complexities of this issue, a concrete analysis of a given social formation at a given moment is always necessary, both for socialist approaches to the state and revolutionary organization.

In fact, I wrote very little about the question of state independence for the simple reason that (with the exception of Poland) the debate in the Russian empire before 1917 did not revolve around secession. In this period, none of the main borderland Marxist parties, with the exception of the Polish PPS, advocated secession—neither, for that matter, did the bourgeois nationalist parties. Most borderland Marxists criticized the Bolsheviks, correctly in my opinion, for advocating empire-wide centralism and opposing federalism/wide autonomy for both the government and the revolutionary party. Given the specific context of the Russian empire in this period, I hardly think this makes them “separatists” or “nationalists,” as Mike asserts. Mike’s comments about independence are useful, but do not engage with the actual debates I examined in my article.

3) More substantially, Mike's reply does not acknowledge the fact that the Bolsheviks changed their position on the national question after 1917. For instance, he writes: "Why assume that the nationalists are the voice from the borderlands, but the forces wanting a federated multinational state don't represent a voice from the borderlands?" In actuality, for the two decades before 1917 it was precisely the borderland Marxists who advocated state federalism, while Lenin, *Iskra* and then the Bolsheviks denounced this position as "nationalism." My article sought to demonstrate that the Bolsheviks adopted after 1917 the basic stances—federalist, non-assimilationist, etc.—long advocated by most borderland Marxists. Had the Bolsheviks accepted these positions earlier, the whole course of the revolutionary movement might have been very different.

This assumption that Lenin and the Bolsheviks argued for the same position before and after 1917 is evident in Mike's argument that "the key issue that the Bolsheviks were grappling with" was whether it was possible to "form a relatively large socialist state that could withstand the pressures of external capitalism." In fact, before 1917 all of the writings on the national question of the Bolsheviks concerned what form of democratic state under capitalism should replace the autocracy; the question of the forms of a socialist state was basically not discussed. Borderland Marxists criticized Lenin's assertion that large states (even those established through imperial conquest like Czarist Russia) were generally progressive even under capitalism. Were they wrong to do so? I happen to think it was a good thing that the Bolsheviks and the Communist International after 1917 dropped such assertions, which failed to take into account the difference between an empire (like Czarist Russia) and a nation-state.

I don't disagree with Mike's points about the need for post-revolutionary societies and governments to combine their forces as much as possible to combat imperialism. But even if one agrees with the idea that the preservation of the largest state framework possible is a generally a good thing even under capitalism, I think the evidence is overwhelming that the Bolsheviks undercut the attractiveness of their case for this perspective before 1917 by advocating assimilation, rejecting political decentralization for such a large state, and rejecting institutionalized cultural autonomy for the different peoples of the state. I argue that the Bolsheviks' advocacy of a big state, their generally dismissive attitude to national cultures, and their underestimation of the urge for organizational (party) and political (state) autonomy by oppressed peoples undermined their pre 1917 efforts to build a revolutionary party of all peoples in the empire, not just the Great Russians.

4) Mike says that I assume "that the separatist and pro-nationalist forces (somehow) speak FOR those nationalities." Apart from the questionable characterization of the borderland Marxists as "separatists," this raises a useful question about political representation. I think that since every nationality (like every social class) is heterogeneous, no one party can claim to be the sole voice of it. Thus a revolutionary party's relative "representativeness" can only be proven in practice: i.e. through its membership base among a given people (or class), its mass influence in popular struggles and mass organizations, in elections, etc.

By all accounts, the Bolsheviks, unlike the borderland Marxists, failed to build a base among most oppressed peoples before 1917. The Bolsheviks were generally about 75-80% ethnic Russians, with the rest of their membership consisting largely of assimilated Jewish intelligentsia like Trotsky who had zero base among non-Russian workers. For the political reasons I explained in the article, the Bolsheviks tended to attract the most anti-national Marxists in the empire's periphery. The Bolsheviks certainly represented a legitimate opinion in the borderlands, but the evidence is overwhelming that their position (pre 1917) was a politically counterproductive one from the standpoint of building working-class unity in the fight against national oppression and capitalism.

5) Kasama's introduction to the article asserts that I criticize "the very idea of a multinational communist party." This is not accurate. All of the major borderland Marxist parties were

multinational (with the exception of the Bund). The main argument by borderland Marxists was simply that given the specific context of the Czarist empire, the most effective form for empire-wide revolutionary coordination was a looser, federalist framework between regional/national parties, as opposed to the centralization advocated by Iskra and later the Bolsheviks. This debate was later raised again inside the Communist International, when Irish and Algerian communists insisted on having their own Marxist parties distinct from, respectively, the English and French, even though they lived under the same state. I certainly do not think having as a general rule one centralized communist party for a context of an empire is necessarily the most effective revolutionary strategy.

6) Were the Bolsheviks simply more radical than the other Marxists in the empire? Mike argues that “this essay treats all socialists as socialists, in the sense that he assumes that the separatist Social Democrats of the Russian periphery were as radical and as socialist as the Bolsheviks ... Most currents in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (and in the similar parties that emerged outside of it) were not particularly focused on socialist revolution.”

I demonstrated that the first socialists in the whole empire to argue for a direct transition to socialism were from the borderlands (Kelles-Krauz in the PPS, the SR-Maximalists in Bialystock, etc.) But the main debate in the empire pre-1917 was not over whether or how fast one could move to socialism. All the main Marxist parties in Russia before 1917—from the Bolsheviks, to Mensheviks, to borderland Marxists—agreed that the upcoming Russian Revolution could not move beyond capitalism (unless and until Western Europe went socialist.)

The actual debate was whether the proletariat and its parties could or should ally with the liberals (and bourgeoisie more generally) in the fight to overthrow the Czar and establish a democratic republic under capitalism. On the whole, the borderland Marxists rejected the right-wing Menshevik claim that an alliance with the liberals was possible and/or necessary. In fact, borderland Marxists like the Bund were so radical in 1905 that the Bolsheviks pushed for their rejoining the RSDLP in 1906, against the wishes of the Mensheviks. After 1905, the borderland Marxists’ “non-factional” position was closest to Leon Trotsky (who remained outside of the Bolshevik fraction, but who was just as politically radical) and it was with Trotsky that they were most closely allied. Like Trotsky, most borderland Marxist parties after 1917 supported Soviet power and joined the Communists, though I do think that the limitations of the “non-factional” approach was demonstrated in 1917 proper in the borderlands (this is a very interesting history that requires more space than I have here).

7) Mike asks: “Did those white racist motel and restaurant owners have some right to self-determination for their own property — as libertarians claim? The view of many leftists (in the U.S.) on self-determination has much more in common with Ron Paul than with communist politics.” I think Mike here fails to note the crucial distinction between oppressor and oppressed nationalities. Marxists shouldn’t support “self-determination” for oppressor nationalities (like whites in the U.S.), because to do so would necessarily enforce domination and oppression. In contrast, struggles for national demands and self-determination by oppressed peoples against ruling powers are generally progressive and are often critical components of the fight for socialist revolution. This does not mean Marxists should ever uncritically support national struggles or their leaderships, but rather that they should identify with and participate in these struggles to push them in the direction of working-class unity and independence: i.e. in the direction of socialist revolution.

Thanks again to Mike Ely and Kasama for engaging in this discussion, which I think has important implications for socialist theory and practice today. I look forward to continuing it.

Eric Blanc

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<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/06/05/national-struggles-by-oppressed-peoples-are-generally-progressive/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://kasamaproject.org/threads/entry/national-liberation-and-bolshevism-reexamined-a-view-from-the-borderlands>

[2] See on ESSF (article 32129), [National liberation: Some problems with Eric Blanc's analysis - The value of large multinational socialist states](#).

[3] See on ESSF (article 32027), [Russian Revolution - The constituent assembly and the national question: Response to Eric Blanc](#).

[4] See on ESSF (article 32028), [Russian Revolution, Marxist legacy - Five views on 'National Liberation and Bolshevism': A response](#).